

# José Rodríguez Labandera



[1804 - ?]

**INVENTED EARLY SUBMARINE  
ECUADOR**

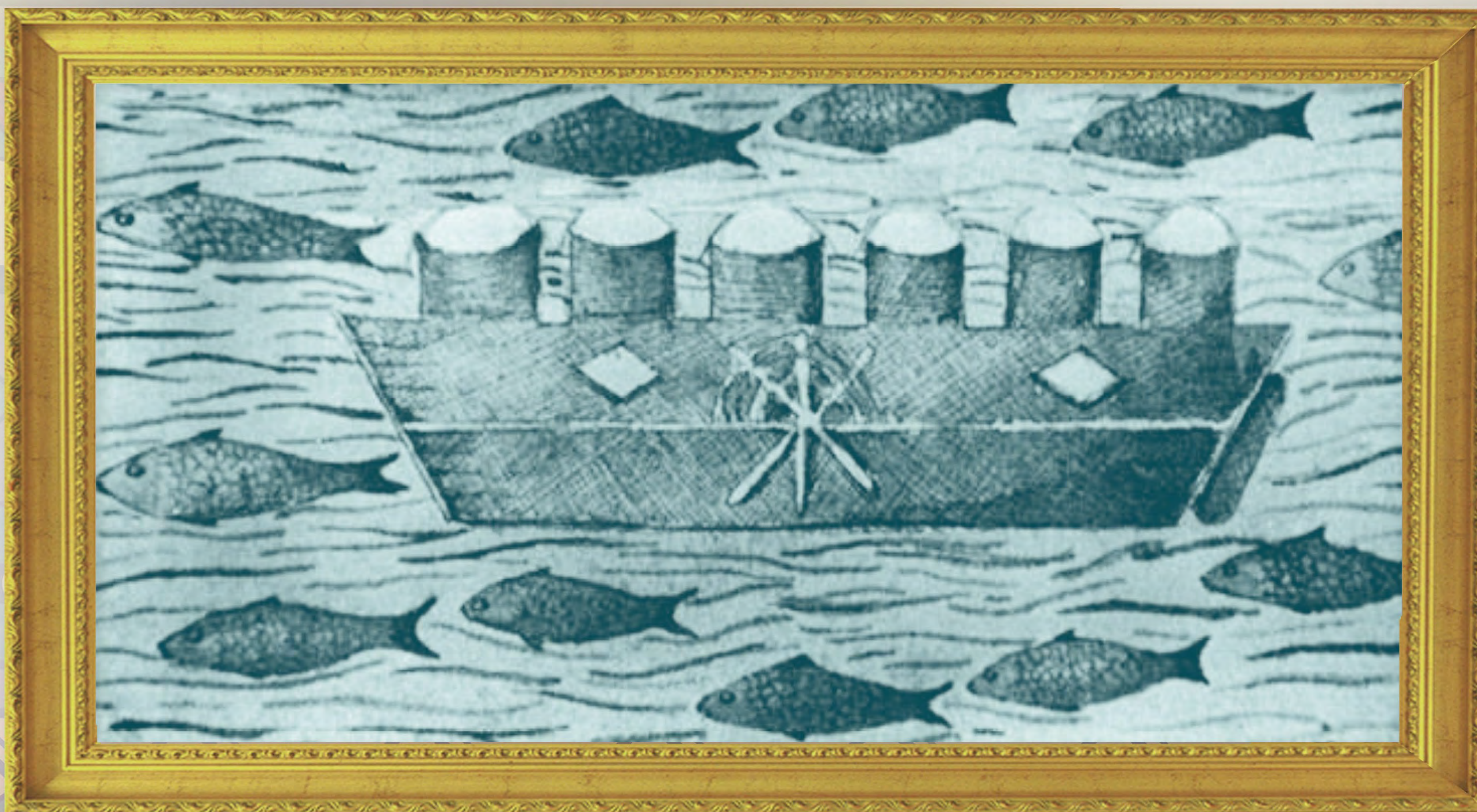
As a large audience anxiously watched from the banks of Guayaquil, Ecuador's Guayas River on September 18, 1838, the first submarine built in Latin America gingerly left the dock. On board were the inventor – a young Ecuadorian sailor named José Rodríguez Labandera – and his friend, José Quevedo.

Called *El Hipopótamo* ("The Hippopotamus"), the strange, bulky craft built of wood and iron quickly sank to the muddy riverbed, with only a pipe breaking the water's surface. As the crowd held its breath during minutes of uncertainty, *El Hipopótamo* slowly ascended, demonstrating the genius of its design.

Its designer was José Rodríguez Labandera. Born in 1804, he joined Ecuador's military at age 18 and became a Lieutenant in the naval forces by age 25. Labandera was a prolific inventor, designing mechanical toys and musical instruments, as well as an innovative wooden leg with metal joints. He was also the founding editor of a newspaper, *The Patriot*.

The concept for submarines dates back to the 4th century BC, and the launch of a basic submersible - *The Turtle* - had been attempted in the American Revolution, but a successful design had yet to be perfected. For years, Labandera was determined to build a working submarine.

Breathing heavily and sweating inside *El Hipopótamo*, Labandera and Quevedo successfully crossed the Guayas River on that September day to the relief of a cheering crowd. *El Hipopótamo* crossed the Guayas on two more occasions, but the project was then abandoned due to a lack of government funding. Another submarine would not be built in South America for three decades until Chile built the German-designed *Flach*, which sank in 1866, drowning all 11 men aboard.



Photos from: Enciclopedia del Ecuador

Labandera's efforts will not be forgotten. Today, there is a Guayaquil high school named "José Rodríguez Labandera Agricultural Technical School", which serves more than 1,500 students. Every September 18, the school marks the anniversary of Labandera's brave maiden voyage from that jetty in Guayaquil. A scale model of *El Hipopótamo* can be viewed in Guayaquil's Naval Museum.

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